

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

October 7, 2005

The Honorable George W. Bush  
President  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We are writing to follow up on a letter sent to you on July 25, 2005, regarding provisions in the Iraqi constitution that guarantee the rights of Iraqi women. Additionally, we would like to express our concerns about challenges that Iraqi women currently are facing.

As you know, a national vote on the draft constitution, which was only ready for printing on September 14<sup>th</sup>, is expected by October 15, 2005. This constitution will replace the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) which provides for equality of all Iraqis regardless of gender and sets the goal of providing Iraqi women with 25% of the seats in the transitional assembly. We are pleased that the current draft of the constitution, according to media reports, designates a goal to achieve that same representation in the Council of Representatives, and states that "citizens, male and female, have the right to participate in public matters and enjoy political rights, including the right to vote and run as candidates." These provisions are especially important because women must have the opportunity to fight against future efforts that would restrict their rights or relegate them to second-class status, and we applaud them.

However, we continue to have serious concerns about the draft constitution's effect on the rights of Iraqi women. The draft constitution includes provisions that will move certain family matters, such as divorce, inheritance and marriage, from civil courts to religious courts. Other provisions in the draft constitution could lead to the Supreme Federal Court being dominated by religious clerics. Iraqi women, who were important to Iraqi society under the regime of Saddam Hussein, are playing an even more critical role in the future of Iraq now that his tyranny has ended. They should not be denied their rightful place in society by those who would seek to have the rights of women stripped away.

Iraqi women face other challenges. Gender-based violence against Iraqi women and girls is a serious issue that warrants greater attention and resources aimed at prevention. Iraqi women serving in various government positions have been targeted and kidnaped or killed. The fear of violence has forced some women to stay out of public life and the workforce and seek refuge in their homes, although many women also face the horrors of domestic violence. Additionally, we believe that ensuring access to education for Iraqi women and girls will be vital for all Iraqi citizens to have true equality in a post-Saddam Iraq. The proposed Iraqi constitutional guarantee of education only through elementary school is inadequate. Finally, Iraqi women lack the necessary legal assistance to challenge laws and judicial actions that are discriminatory or result in the erosion of their rights. Now, more than ever, the United States must support U.S., international, and Iraqi NGOs that are working in the fields of women's rights and human rights, but are seriously underfunded and lacking in resources to do the job of assisting women.

Mr. President, the press has reported that you believe the Iraqi Constitution "protects fundamental human freedoms, including freedom for women."<sup>1</sup> It has been widely discussed that while the language of the Constitution appears to assure some rights of women, many have serious concerns that the implementation of the constitution could reduce the rights of women provided even under the reign of Saddam Hussein. We would like to know what you are doing to guarantee the rights of women of Iraq. Do you have a specific plan with concrete steps that the United States will take to ensure that Iraqi women do not lose democratic and legal rights?

Thank you for your attention in this matter. We would appreciate a meeting with you to discuss these very important concerns. We look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,

Capt. B. Mah  
C. A. Dutch Ruppensberger

Lynn C. Wadley  
Theresa A. McMurtry

Shane E. Watson

Rail M. Hjalma

Eleanor H. Harte

Jan L. Harte  
John R. Owens

Carolyn McCarthy

Eddie Bernice Johnson

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<sup>1</sup>Wallsten, Peter. "Bush Likens Democracy Effort in Iraq to That in Postwar Japan." Los Angeles Times 31 August 2005, home ed., A-17.

List of Signers:

The Honorable Carolyn B. Maloney  
The Honorable Lynn Woolsey  
The Honorable C.A. "Dutch" Ruppersberger  
The Honorable Michael McNulty  
The Honorable Diane Watson  
The Honorable Raúl Grijalva  
The Honorable Eleanor Holmes Norton  
The Honorable Janice Schakowsky  
The Honorable Carolyn McCarthy  
The Honorable Major R. Owens  
The Honorable Eddie Bernice Johnson